

VZCZCXRO2902
RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV
DE RUEHBS #3540/01 2911315
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 181315Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3383
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 0059
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 0483
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2313
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 003540

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KISL](#) [SOCL](#) [BE](#)
SUBJECT: EMBASSY OCTOBER 16 IFTAR: BELGIAN MUSLIMS PONDER
THEIR PLACE IN SOCIETY

REF: BRUSSELS 3488

¶1. (U) More than 20 guests at Ambassador Korologos' October 16 Iftar dinner discussed the October 8 local elections in Belgium, Muslim identity and integration into Belgian society, and whether it is possible to criticize Islam. This was the Ambassador's second Iftar dinner of this Ramadan season (see reftel for first Iftar) and the fourth Iftar dinner he has hosted since his arrival in Belgium in 2004. The Ambassador underscored his aim of furthering mutual understanding and dialogue between the Muslim community in Belgium and the embassy. Guests included senior Ambassadors from Muslim countries, members of the Muslim Executive, and various leaders from Belgium's Moroccan and Turkish communities.

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES GAIN POWER IN LOCAL ELECTION

¶2. (U) The first topic focused upon how Muslim immigrants in Belgium are wielding increasing power through participation in the democratic process. The October 8 local vote resulted in the election 145 candidates of foreign origin, compared to 91 elected officials in 2000 and just 14 in 1994. The Ambassador wondered why this is the case and its implications. An Imam of Moroccan heritage noted that although there is no tradition of voting in Morocco, immigrants in Belgium increasingly realize the importance of voting, and how elected officials represent the interests of the community at the local, regional, and federal levels. One guest noted that local journalists had turned a critical eye to newly elected minority candidates, which he saw as an effort to "de-legitimize" them. The Ambassador of Jordan opined that the election results could be interpreted in two ways. The election of more foreign-origin candidates to local leadership positions could represent a simple increase in power and growing organization of the diverse immigrant communities in Belgium. Conversely, the election of 145 candidates of non-Belgian origin might reveal "a failure of the host state and local communities to integrate" immigrants into Belgian society. The Ambassador noted that immigration issues would likely play a central role in upcoming elections in the U.S. in early November.

CRITICIZE, YES; INSULT, NO

¶3. (U) In the wake of the Danish cartoon controversy, recent remarks by the Pope, and several press articles on the topic, the guests considered whether, in general, it is possible to criticize Islam. By way of background, one guest noted that Islam has a long tradition of critical thinking that encourages enquiry and debate. He cited an example from the Koran of the Prophet Mohammed debating with a non-believer. Most guests agreed that Islam could indeed be criticized, but

only in a context of respect. The negative side of criticism, characterized by "insulting the dignity of the other," should be avoided. Most also agreed that the Danish cartoons had crossed this line. The Ambassador observed that whereas he too found the cartoons offensive, he deplored the subsequent violence in protest of them.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador to Turkey affirmed his country's desire to join the European Union. Despite some "problems" such as PKK he believes that Turkey deserves to be in the European Union. However, he raised the issue of a political party in Belgium that proposed legislation outlawing discussion of what he characterized as being labeled the "Armenian genocide." He predicted that if this legislation went forward, it would present difficulties of identity for the Turkish community in Belgium.

INTEGRATE . . . OR ELSE

¶5. (U) Integration and identity remain key preoccupations with the Muslim community in Belgium. Most guests defined themselves as "Belgians of (country of origin) descent." Guests estimated that there are up to 700,000 Muslims in Belgium. While most guests agreed that their children do benefit from living in Belgium, there remain concerns about the lack of integration of the young generation of Muslims into Belgian society. One guest noted that Muslims are increasingly feeling "hostility on all sides," labeled and stigmatized "for something they have nothing to do with." There was general concern that this might breed a sense of frustration, isolation, and alienation that could wear away at a unified vision of living together in a pluralistic society. One guest cautioned that European countries need to ensure that minorities can participate in society if Europe

BRUSSELS 00003540 002 OF 002

wants to avoid "its own 9/11" or attacks like those in London and Madrid. The Ambassador of Jordan urged an examination of the roots of terrorism, which he defined as a lack of justice in the Arab world. He concluded by stating that integration is the responsibility of all, the immigrants and the host country alike.

KOROLOGOS

.